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AUTHOR Cunha, Victoria
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ABSTRACT

In order to explore whether the medium employed to promote a given event also helps to shape the accompanying myth which is attached to any significant happening, it will be useful to compare the two rock concerts, 1969's Woodstock and 1985's Live Aid. One difference is the way in which the two concerts were organized, promoted, and executed; Woodstock being for "peace and music," Live Aid designed for famine fund-raising. It is also useful to expand upon the notion of the mythic qualities of Woodstock, how Live Aid attempted to capitalize on those, and the ultimate differences in the two events that were enhanced by the respective mass media used to advertise and immortalize both concerts. The comparison shows that Live Aid failed to attain Woodstock-like status in spite of its lofty aims and achievements because the concerts are the emblems of two different generations, as well as the embodiments of two different philosophies. (Twenty-six footnotes are included.) (MS)

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# THE MEDIUM IS THE (ROCK) MESSAGE:

# A MYTHIC COMPARISON

# OF

# WOODSTOCK AND LIVE AID

Victoria Cunha
300 S. Maple Ave.
Oak Park, IL 60302
Debut

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Woodstock and Live Aid. Say these words and most people old enough to have some memory of the former (or at least to have seen the movie) and a passing familiarity with the latter (after all, perhaps they have a Live Aid t-shirt at home) will conjure up discrete images both of these events. It is true that both occurrences were, in fact, rock concerts featuring a goodly number of mega-stars in the rock music pantheon. Some of the performers were even on the bill for both events (e.g., Joan Baez, The Who, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young). Also, Woodstock and Live Aid both appealed to an American, middle-class, 18-30-year-old audience.

But the similarities between the two end there. Counting a sixteen-year span from 1969 to 1985, many other differences between Woodstock and Live Aid come into play. One of these is the way in which both concerts were organized, promoted, and executed; Woodstock being for "peace and music," Live Aid designed for famine fund-raising. Another difference, which this paper will attempt to expand upon, is the notion of the mythic qualities of Woodstock, how Live Aid attempted to capitalize on those, and finally, the ultimate differences in the two events that were enhanced by the respective mass media that were used to advertise and immortalize both concerts.

The question that will be explored in this study is: does the medium employed to promote a given event also help to shape the accompanying myth which is attached to any significant happening? It would have seemed that the two events chosen for investigation, Woodstock and Live Aid, were significant in terms

of their respective sizes, scopes, and purposes. But by promoting the former via print, radio, and word-of-mouth, and the latter by television and cable, does not a wholly different set of mythic rules apply to each of them?

Before setting up a theoretical model of inquiry, it would be appropriate to cite an essay by popular culture critic David Wright that extolls rock music and its trappings as a viable barometer of youth sentiment in this country. He writes that ". . . rock and roll is more than just a medium in the traditional (i.e., McLuhanesque) sense of the word; it is an environmental envelope as well as a means of communication. The entire social pattern of the counter culture from the record hop, to parking, to drug happenings, to peace marches, to Woodstock, . . . is rock and roll-centered."[1] This important notion is one to keep in mind when assessing such popular artifacts as rock concerts.

Furthermore, this investigation will term the products of rock music (e.g., records, rock videos, etc.) "images" in Kenneth Boulding's sense, for they depend "upon all the elements of that culture or subculture."[2] Boulding goes on to say that " . . . if a group of people are to share the same image of the world, . . . and if this same group of people are exposed to much the same set of messages in building up images of the world, the value systems of all individuals must be approximately the same."[3] Subsequently, one might argue that on the respective years when Live Aid and Woodstock were staged, the images of each of their generations coalesced to form an enduring symbol that will signal to

future generations what the 1980's (or the 1960's) were all about.

To further this idea, Danial J. Boorstin's notion of the pseudo-event, or created happening, may be applied more suitably to Live Aid, with its corporate sponsors and trans-Atlantic ping-ponging, than to Woodstock, which seems almost prehistorically simple by comparison. Boorstin explains, "[w]henever in the public mind a pseudo-event competes for attention with a spontaneous event in the same field, the pseudo-event will tend to dominate. What happens on television will overshadow what happens off television."[4] In this case, Boorstin's statement is false. For whichever way Live Aid is remembered in the future, it (by the nature of the medium used to promote it, television) will never achieve the mythic proportions of Woodstock, even though its immediate audience was much larger, even though its ostensive purpose was much more successful, even though many more prominent persons of note endorsed the event as a humanitarian gesture, and so on. What matters in myth, it appears, is the spontaneous opportunity for a collectivity to embrace an event as a symbol of their existence. It happened with Prohibition, World War II, and Woodstock. But it did not happen with Live Aid.

One of the most influential media critics of the modern age is Marshall McLuhan. His discussions of many of the workings of mass media still stand after his death as insightful harbingers of technological occurrences. McLuhan offered an updated definition of myth in his essay entitled "Myth and Mass Media." He expounds, "myth is always a montage or transparency comprising

several external spaces and times in a single image or situation."[5] As such, a myth could be almost anything, but McLuhan was applying this phrase with an eye toward the various media of the electronic age, such as radio, television, films, newspapers, and advertising. Even more importantly, myth in the McLuhanesque mode can be a vehicle for a collectivity's particular expression of its beliefs, attitudes, and values. In this same vein, McLuhan continues, "today we live in a post-literate and electronic world, in which we seek images of collective postures of mind, even when studying the individual. In some respects, myth was the means of access to such collective postures in the past. But our new technology gives us many new means of access to group-dynamic patterns."[6]

It is true that some of McLuhan's prophesies were garbled, or written in the jargon of the video behemoth. The philosopher Kenneth Burke classifies McLuhan's work to "an area indeterminately midway between the homo faber of Techologism and the concepts of symbolic action inherent in the explicit, systematic application of a Dramatistic perspective."[7] However, perhaps McLuhan knew that nothing in the television age would be exactly as it was portrayed. Perhaps at times his insight cursed his clarity, and forced his chameleon-like stances. Yet his most famous idea, one that this paper will attempt to justify within the context of Woodstock and Live Aid, is that the medium is the message. For as communication scholar Bruce Gronbeck puts it, "[e]arly McLuhan seemingly postulated that `the medium is the message,' therefore, because the medium of communication was seen

as generator of both personal perception and collective organization."[8]

It is within this narrow focus, namely that the medium is the myth, that this study will find its aim. In other words, does the medium by which a particular spectacle is promoted or presented lend its myth-making (or myth-breaking) qualities to that spectacle? Does the respective communication of an event or events help to shape the overall way in which the event or events are remembered by observers? And finally, what inferences can be drawn from the specific examples of Live Aid and Woodstock regarding the longevity and potency of a given myth?

## I. Woodstock

> There are people just sitting in that field. It's really beautiful.
>
> -unidentified Woodstock attendee[9]

The Woodstock Music and Art Festival of 1969 (also known as the Aquarian Exposition) was held over a three-day August weekend in a dairy farm field near Bethel, New York. Popular culture historian and critic Russel Nye records the event as drawing "300,000 people, perhaps the largest number in the United States to hear a live performance directly."[10] Other estimates of attendance went as high as 500,000 persons. The acts, the music, the drugs, and the rain and mud are all part of history, yet some might deny that this happening was respective of the youth sentiment at that particular moment in time, coming so soon after the successful moon landing of Apollo 11 (a prize for establishment

technology) and the Manson family murders (a blow to hippie legitimization).

The concert was promoted through print ads in The New York Times and other news dailies, and also through radio ads, posters, and word-of-mouth. Tickets were sold at head shops, and camping for the whole three-day festival was encouraged. Woodstock was eventually turned into a film for Warner Bros., one which still plays college campuses and midnight shows, and one which was the only substantial money-making product of the concert itself. In fact, more than five years after the event, its promoters recorded a net loss of $100,000 in their business ledgers.[11] However, despite the monetary fiasco, "Woodstock Nation went into the books with a sweet smell, all things considered, once Max Yasgur's nonpaying cattle could breathe again without getting stoned."[12] In songs, stories, and written accounts with which the children of the sixties identified, Woodstock was handed down as a mythic happening. "We are stardust, we are golden," wrote Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. One of the concert's organizers, Joel Rosenman, remembers the time by saying, "Woodstock had been a Phenomenon. It's comforting to have phenomenon status. Phenomenons may lose money and still be respected entries in encyclopedias.[13]

Yet all was not sweetness and light, regardless of all the rock paeans written to Woodstock. In addition to all the bad acid trips, there were certain dilemmas created by such a mass gathering that had not been foreseen until it was almost too late. Paul Sann, a sixties biographer, writes, "[t]he problems

this unprecedented love-in created in sanitation, shelter, feeding and health care, not to mention the all but total paralysis of traffic in and out of that resort haven in the height of its season, almost defy description."[14] And as a final note, a quotation from singer Arlo Guthrie during his performance at Woodstock: "The New York freeway is closed, man--far out!"[15] Indeed, the innocence of the concert's aims, the non-violent nature of its participants, and the spirit of cooperation that was fostered by the various groups and individuals involved might together have saved Woodstock from becoming a national catastrophe.

## II. Live Aid

We could be heroes just for one day.
-David Bowie[16]

The Live Aid concerts of July 13, 1985, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and London, England, together functioned as a colossal fund-raising effort for the famine-stricken peoples of Africa. The fourteen-hour rock marathon featured performances on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean in short, 22-minute segments. While one band was playing in London, another was setting up in Philly; as the American fans watched on huge video monitors, it was vice versa for the British attendees. Meanwhile, a widespread cable, television, and radio network broadcast the event, in live or delayed mode, to nearly two billion persons over the world. At the close of the concert, a figure of $70 million was released as the official count, mostly in the form of pledges

received on the toll-free phone number 1-800-LIVE AID. Sales of Live Aid-related paraphernalia (t-shirts, sweatshirts, etc.) were also added to totals, for this event was entirely voluntary, corporate-sponsored, and tax deductible. While the Beach Boys were "sendin' those good vibrations 'round the world," taped messages from prominent activists like Coretta Scott King and Bishop Desmond Tutu played to urge even more donations from philanthropic yuppies.

Yet before the first note of the concert had sounded, certain members of the popular press were extolling Live Aid as the "Woodstock of the MTV generation."[17] This theme was to be repeated sporadically throughout the concert as well as afterward, as the proponents of Live Aid attempted to capitalize on the mythic appeal of Woodstock. This identification was aimed at people who might want to remember a period that, at least to them, seemed less complicated and more carefree. An example: "`This is your Woodstock, and its long overdue,' [Joan] Baez added, kicking off a cappella with `Amazing Grace' and segueing into `We Are the World.'"[18] The problems at Live Aid, if any, were disguised by the breakneck page of the acts and the constant reminders to give generously.

In fact, the whole event may have been so well-planned that there was little room in its rigidity for any sort of mishap. The main organizer of Live Aid, Bob Geldof, said, "[i]t's not just the greatest show on earth, . . . it's the greatest gig in the galaxy."[19] However, by overmanaging the event's presentation (mostly via the "throwaway" medium of television), Live Aid's

organizers might have precluded any spontaneous occurrences of sub-events that would truly have captured the attention of the American public. Admittedly, there were moments interspersed throughout the concert which achieved a sort of greatness, such as Mick Jagger's duet with Tina Turner, David Bowie's set, and the finales in both London and Philly. As a planned event, Live Aid worked beautifully. But as a spontaneous, Woodstock-like concert, Live Aid did not measure up to mythic standards.

Some further comparisons of Woodstock and Live Aid will serve to sharpen this distinction, especially with regard to how their different uses of media shaped their respective stories.

## III. The Event and the Pseudo-Event

> The similarity I felt between Woodstock and Live Aid was that desire for some unwritten solidarity, for a chance for their community to come together.
> -Joan Baez[20]

An astute chronicler of both the Woodstock phenomenon and the Live Aid effort is journalist Samuel G. Freedman. In adding to his observations, there is the question of the media in which each of the events were promoted. To begin, Freedman says, "Woodstock was on the surface an apolitical event, promising merely `three days of music and peace,' which took on enormous resonance more by what it represented than by what it said outright. Live Aid was a political event--in that it was created solely to raise money for African famine relief--that largely appealed to fans as a mega-concert."[21] He goes on to say that "[i]f [Live Aid] itself was modelled in Woodstock, the broadcast

borrowed more from the 1984 Olympics and the Jerry Lewis telethon."[22]. In other words, unlike Woodstock, Live Aid was designed with an eye toward what would "play" on an eighteen-inch diagonal screen and how to fit the appropriate sponsor in every half-hour, rather than on what felt good at the time, or improvisation, or just plain karma. Freedman continues, "[t]his was not a gathering of young people in a remote upstate New York meadow, but a slickly-produced trans-Atlantic telethon that raised tens of millions of dollars."[23]

True enough, but did the differing aims of Woodstock and Live Aid make such a difference in the execution of each concert? Perhaps in Live Aid's case, the myth was lost along the way to the bank. As Freedman put it, "Woodstock seemed to be a generation's celebration of itself--of its alienation and its modes of self-expression. `Live Aid' and its American anthem, `We Are the World' purport to be a more mature generation's attempt to embrace the plant spiritually and electronically."[24]

But as to the ultimate question at hand, does the medium help to shape the event's accompanying myth, the answer is unquestionably yes, at least in the case of Live Aid and Woodstock. For as Freedman reports, "[e]ven in Kennedy Stadium itself, the crowd did not watch the performers as much as it watched the images on several huge video monitors. It was the Marshall McLuhan's `global village' village prophecy come to pass."[25] Undoubtedly, the self-reflexive behavior of the 1980's needs no further explanation. We need to know that we will feel good to feel good. But in the exploratory modes of the 1960's, feeling

bad was OK as long as you could tell others about it, and learn from the experience.

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated the failure of Live Aid to attain Woodstock-like status in spite of its lofty aims and achievements. In other words, by the very nature of Live Aid's media coverage, it has been accorded a place beside all the other television telethons and rock benefits, regardless of its mammoth audience and overall recognition. Live Aid cannot compare to Woodstock because they are two different generations' emblems, as well as two different philosophies' embodiments. The main factor in this McLuhanesque dialogue is, of course, their differing media, "hot" for Woodstock and "cool" for Live Aid, with the success for longevity on the former. As David Wright would confirm, "[t]his [use of electronic media] has had an effect on them [the respective audiences], lending credence to Marshall McLuhan's claim that television has produced a generation gap which is not a matter of semantics, but a neurological fact. The media, especially television, have altered the perception of the younger generation in a way that makes them quite different from any of their forefathers in the post-Gutenberg era."[26] Consequently, it is this very tension that only can be resolved through the use of parallel media usage; yet it is doubtful that we may return to the ideal collective in our ever-continuing march toward video supremacy, computer literacy, and the isolation of the individual through technology.

FOOTNOTES

[1]David Wright, "Rock Music, Media, and the Counter Culture," in New Dimensions in Popular Culture, Russel B. Nye, ed. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1972, p. 219.

[2]Kenneth Boulding, The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1956, p. 16.

[3]Boulding, pp. 14-15.

[4]Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image. New York: Atheneum, 1972, p. 39.

[5]Marshall McLuhan, "Myth and Mass Media," in Myth and Mythmaking, Henry A. Murray, ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1960, p. 298.

[6]McLuhan, p. 293.

[7]Kenneth Burke, "`Medium as Message,'" in Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, p. 62.

[8]Bruce E. Gronbeck, "McLuhan as Rhetorical Theorist," Journal of Communication 31: 3(Summer 1981), p. 123.

[9]Woodstock: A Film. Directed by Michael Wadleigh. Warner Bros., 1970.

[10]Russel Nye, The Unembarassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America. New York: The Dial Press, 1970, p. 357.

[11]Joel Rosenman, John Roberts, and Robert Pilpel, Young Men With Unlimited Capital. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974, p. 209.

[12]Paul Sann, The Angry Decade: The Sixties. New York: Crown Publishers, 1979, p. 287.

[13]Rosenman et al., p. 213.

[14]Sann, op cit.

[15]Woodstock: A Film.

[16]Live Aid MTV broadcast (videotape), July 13, 1985.

[17]Richard Harrington, "The Greatest Show on Earth Tomorrow," The Washington Post, July 12, 1985, p. D8.

[18]Richard Harrington, "Rock Around the World," The Washington Post, July 14, 1985, p. A16.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Samuel G. Freedman, "Live Aid and the Woodstock Nation," The New York Times, July 18, 1985, p. C19.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Wright, p. 212.